

The Pressure to Always Find Something

There is a very specific kind of excitement that comes with Birding Big Day. The alarm goes off at an hour that would be completely unreasonable for almost any other activity, the flasks are packed, the lists are ready, and for one full day every call, movement and distant shape feels as though it could matter.

I love it. I really do. But I also think Birding Big Day is probably the day when I feel the pressure of birding most clearly.

Last year, we stayed at Zaagkuilsdrift Bird Sanctuary and Lodge so that we could be right there and ready to start birding at around 3am. In theory, this was a brilliant plan. No long drive before we could begin, no wasted time getting into one of the best birding areas, just wake up, get out, and start building the list.

The only slight complication was that the water on Crake Road was incredibly high. Getting in and out from the lodge was not exactly a calm little start to the morning. In the darkness, with the road ahead disappearing into water and the whole day still waiting on the other side, there was already a nervous energy before the birding had even properly begun.

Once we reached Zaagies Road, though, that nervousness quickly changed into something else. The pressure to find as many birds as possible took over.

That is part of Birding Big Day, of course. You are meant to be looking constantly. You are meant to keep moving, listening, checking, adding, trying to make the most of every part of the route. There is a thrill in hearing a call and immediately realising it is another species for the list, or spotting something that you knew could make a difference to the final total. For a while, the momentum carries you beautifully.

But somewhere in that momentum, it becomes very easy to stop simply enjoying where you are.

Zaagkuilsdrift is the sort of place where, on an ordinary birding morning, I could happily spend ages watching what is moving through the grass, listening to the wetland sounds, or stopping for a bird I have seen many times before simply because it is doing something interesting. On Birding Big Day, your brain works differently. A bird is often registered, counted, and then almost immediately replaced by the question of what comes next.

Have we got that one yet? What are we still missing? Should we keep moving? Are we wasting time here? What might other teams already be finding?

By the time we returned to the lodge around midday, we had already been out for hours. Under normal circumstances, getting back after a morning of birding would have felt like the perfect opportunity to stop, breathe, eat something and take in the fact that we were staying in such a special place. But the tally was still sitting there in the back of my mind.

Yes, it was midday. Yes, we had already had a full morning. But surely there were still more birds to add.

That is the strange part about putting pressure on something you love. You can be surrounded by birds, in a place you have looked forward to being, after a morning that has already given you plenty, and still feel as though the day is somehow falling short. You stop noticing what is there because you are too busy measuring what is missing.

Birding Big Day makes that pressure more obvious because the count is genuinely part of the event. But I think the same feeling can creep into ordinary birding far more easily than we realise. A normal morning out can begin with the hope of finding a target bird, getting a photograph, adding a lifer or simply having something exciting to share afterwards. None of that is wrong. Hope is part of the fun. The problem comes when hope starts turning into a demand.

Nature does not work according to our tally sheets, our plans or the amount of effort we have made to get somewhere. The field is not obliged to perform for us.

Some days it absolutely does. Some days the birds seem to fall into place one after another, and you return home with the kind of stories that almost tell themselves. Other days are slower. A place that has produced beautifully before can suddenly feel quiet. The bird you were sure would be there simply does not appear. You can put in the time, choose the right habitat, arrive early, stay late, and still not get the moment you had imagined.

That is where birding can either become frustrating, or quietly teach us something.

Looking back at that Birding Big Day, I do not regret the urgency. It was part of what made the day exciting. There is something wonderfully ridiculous about being awake in the early hours, navigating a nerve-wracking road in the dark, and then spending the day determined to squeeze every possible bird out of every possible corner. That is part of the adventure.

But it also reminded me how quickly birding can become about what is still missing.

Even surrounded by birds, even in a place as rich as Zaagkuilsdrift, even after a morning that we had planned and looked forward to, there was still that feeling of needing more. One more addition. One more useful stop. One more species before the day could feel complete.

Perhaps that is the balance we have to keep learning. There is nothing wrong with targets, tallies or ambitious birding days. There is nothing wrong with wanting the list to grow or hoping for something special. But there also has to be space to remember why we wanted to be out there in the first place.

Not every outing needs to deliver a lifer. Not every morning needs to produce the perfect photograph. Not every day in the field needs to become a dramatic story afterwards. Sometimes the privilege is simply that you were there, awake before sunrise, listening to a place come alive, watching the world shift from darkness into morning.

I will definitely still feel the pressure on the next Birding Big Day. I will still want the tally to climb, still listen for every possible call, still wonder what we might be missing further down the road. That hope is part of who birders are.

But I think I also want to get better at letting a good day be a good day before the final number tells me whether it was one.